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ABSTRACT

The vocabulary used in textbooks and standardized tests for English as a second language (ESL) is examined to determine how much variation exists. Word lists were compared for six difficulty levels in five frequently-used ESL textbook series (a total of 30 books). Three series of standardized proficiency/placement tests at different levels were studied for commonalities. Noteworthy findings for the textbooks include these: almost half of the 7,581 vocabulary words studied were taught in only one series at any level; only about 1 percent were taught in all series at the same level, and they were generally very basic words taught at the first level; and less than 10 percent were taught in all 5 series but at different and widely varying levels. Analysis of the tests found that many of the vocabulary items tested were not found in any of the textbooks at any level. The study concludes from these results that the lack of uniformity in vocabulary taught to ESL students may be seriously affecting the students' preparation for language use and later study. It recommends that the profession establish a core vocabulary that uniformly and systematically introduces given words at specified proficiency levels in all texts, to be supplemented with additional words of choice. (MSE)

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TEACHER EXPECTATIONS OF ESL STUDENTS: VOCABULARY

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (37th, New Orleans, LA, March 13-15, 1986)

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Teacher Expectations of ESL Students: Vocabulary

Throughout the years, students have been placed into grades, levels, or certain sections of classes and courses because of either an assumption regarding readiness or because of some kind of documentation in the form of an assessment or proficiency score of some type. Certainly on the surface, this practice seems to be a reasonable one. Thus, teachers are given some basis for believing that a second grader has a command of "first-grade words"; that a college-bound high school student will be able, upon graduating, to use the kind of vocabulary needed for university reading and writing; and that a non-native user of English who presents a certain prescribed score on a vocabulary or reading test as a part of college admission, may be assumed to have an adequate inventory of words for doing the required work. It appears that these assumptions are not entirely justified, at least in the area of English as a second language.

This study presents data that indeed identify vast gaps in what a teacher may expect from non-native students who have done their English language study using different series of materials. Over a period of over a decade, I have found that the vocabulary ranges of students who have completed various language programs to be extremely variable. Nor is the problem a new one. Rinsland (1945) noted that "numberous studies show that authors do not agree with any degree of reasonableness on either the number of words or which words to use in even basal subjects in any one grade." Furthermore, I hear over and over the complaint from both teachers and students that the TEOFL words are not the words that the student has been exposed to. I have also heard the TEFOL test developer's defense that the words are chosen from a wide range of university level textbooks and are thus logical choices. And who can argue with that?

The textbooks from which vocabulary items come, however, are books that the students acquire and use after coming to the university and after their English preparation has been completed in many cases. Unless their previous study of English has prepared them to use this "higher education" vocabulary, it is not surprising that so many of the students come with an inadequate command of English in the area of vocabulary.

Some time ago,I decided to at least begin the monumental task of trying to determine the amount of variation that exists among some popular ESL textbook series and to try to discover where commonalities lie. In other words, I wanted to ascertain whether there may be a justifiable basis for a charge that some students are better prepared than are others for public school or university study in the United States simply because of the textbooks they had used in their study of English.

Several kinds of material were examined in my study: the vocabulary lists of five ESL textbook series , each having books for Levels 1 through 6, for a total of thirty books, and the vocabulary sections of three types of standardized proficiency/placement tests: The Michigan Test of English Proficiency , the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). The results were indeed instructive and certainly tend to verify the suspicion that "all ESL textbooks are not created equal."

The procedure for the analysis of the vocabulary lists in the five series of books was as follows: after securing word lists from the texts--five series, each containing Levels 1 through 6, for a total of thirty books, and suitable for use with adolescent to adult learners, I determined how many of the series taught a given word at

all, then at which level it was introduced if taught. In addition, I tabulated the number of words contained in only one of the five books in the series at any level, the number taught in two of the series at the same level, then in two books in the series but at different levels, and so on, through Level 6. A summary of the tabulations of the 7581 words examined is contained in Table 1 below.

Several points are especially noteworthy. As is readily apparent from the table, almost half (49.4%) of the words were taught in only one of the series at any level. For example, the word aboard is taught at Level 6 in the Lado New English Series, but is not taught at all in the other four series examined; adobe is introduced at Level 3 in English for a Changing World, but does not appear in any of the other series at any level.

At the other end of the spectrum, only about 1% of the 7581 words were taught in all the series at the same level. Not surprisingly, these were words such as a, the, book, mother, day, and certain colors, numbers, and the like. In almost all cases, these words were presented uniformly at Level 1.

In the case of words taught in all five series, but at various levels, a mere 9.5%, the range of levels at which the words appear is wide indeed. In many cases, a word taught at Level 1 in one series is not introduced until Level 6 in another. In such cases, we may well be justified in asking, "Are these words for beginners or for advanced learners almost ready for university work?" Take these words, for example:

above	Levels 1, 2, 5
account	1, 5, 6
action	2, 3, 4, 5, and 6
charge	3, 4, 5, and 6

TABLE 1

Word Distribution Levels 1 through 6 in Five Textbook Series

N=7581

	Number of Words	Percentage of Words
Word contained in only one book at any level	3748	49.4%
Word contained in 2 (of 5) books at the same level	459	6.0
Word contained in 2 (of 5) books but at different levels	891	11.7
Word contained in 3 (of 5) books at the same level	107	1.4
Word contained in 3 (of 5) books but at various levels	815	10.7
Word contained in 4 (of 5) books at the same level	26	0.3
Word contained in 5 (of 5) books but at various levels	742	9.8
Word contained in all the 5 books at the same level	85	1.1
Word contained in all the 5 books but at various levels	728	9.6
TOTALS	7581	100.0 %

Likewise, in words appearing in two or three of the series, a word might appear in one series at Level 1 and in another at Level 6, e.g., ancient, appearing in two books at Levels 1 and 6 respectively. Thus, by any measure, it was clearly documented that not only the choice of words to be taught, but the level at which a word is introduced is widely divergent from one series to another.

Having determined the distribution of words among the six levels of the five series of ESL texts frequently used in both public schools as well as in language institutes and in colleges and universities, an examination was made of vocabulary in two standardized proficiency tests: one older form of the TOEFL and six commercially available forms of the vocabulary sections of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. This time, the lexical items on the TOEFL test were sorted according to the number of series of ESL textbooks in which the words also appeared, and, additionally, the number of the words on the TOEFL test which were not taught at any level in any of the five series was recorded. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

When the vocabulary sections of the Michigan tests were analyzed, it was determined that, of 900 Michigan test vocabulary items, 351, or 39.0 % did not appear in any of the ESL textbooks at any level. At the other end of the spectrum, the 124 Michigan test words taught in all of the series, though at various levels, represents only 13.8% of the words on the tests. Thus, of the 7581 words taught in the thirty books, only 8.42% appear in the vocabulary section of the Michigan test forms. A summary of the full tabulation appears in Table 3.

TABLE 2

TOEFL Word Distribution in Five ESL Textbook Series

N = 151

	Number of Words	Percentage of Words
Word does not appear in any of the 30 books	70	46.36
Word contained in only 1 (of 5 series) at any level	29	19.21
Word contained in 2 (of 5 series) at the same level	5	3.31
Word contained in 2 (of 5 series) but at different levels	9	5.96
Word contained in 3 (of 5 series) at the same level	0	0.00
Word contained in 3 (of 5 series) but at various levels	12	7.95
Word contained in 4 (of 5 series) at the same level	1	0.66
Word contained in 4 (of 5 series) but at various levels	11	7.28
Word contained in all 5 series at the same level	0	0.00
Word contained in all 5 series but at various levels	14	9.27
TOTALS	151	100.00%

TABLE 3

Percentage of Michigan Test Vocabulary Items in ESL Books

N = 900	Number of Words	Percentage of Words
Word not taught in any series at any level	351	39.0 %
Word taught in only 1 series at any level	160	17.8
Word taught in 2 series at the same level	23	2.6
Word taught in 2 series but at different levels	62	6.9
Word taught in 3 series at the same level	5	.6
Word taught in 3 series but at various levels	64	7.1
Word taught in 4 series at the same level	4	.4
Word taught in 4 series but at various levels	99	11.0
Word taught in all 5 series at the same level	7	.8
Word taught in all 5 series but at various levels	124	13.8
TOTALS	900	100.0 %

The rationale that the TOEFL and the Michigan tests of English proficiency contain the kinds of words that a student needs to have reasonable expectation of success in college, so far as vocabulary is concerned, appears to be sound; however, unless the student can be introduced to those "college level " words during his formal language preparation, and prior to his college entrance, difficulty is predictable, as has been pointed out above. Given the fact that many international students are not in an English speaking environment much of their out-of-class time, I think it highly unlikely that the students will just "pick up" or otherwise acquire many of these quite sophisticated words unless they are taught systematically, especially since much of the out-of-class speech is highly colloquial, or even "slangy," not academic, scholarly speech. Is a native English-speaking classmate, for example, likely to use such words as "anguish," "consummate," or "chronicle" in the course of a usual school day? I doubt it.

In addition to the tests mentioned above, examination of another kind of test seemed indicated. A large number of the non-native English users in the United States at the present time are former refugees who may or may not be citizens, and many of these students are required, either in high school or college, or both, to take additional tests, tests not designed for the non-native user of English. One such test is the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). Although the test is supposedly testing recognition (not production, significantly) of skills needed for writing in English, taking the test necessarily requires the ability to read and understand the words relevant to the structures being tested. Thus, the vocabulary used in the TSWE was examined, applying the methodology used for looking at the other tests: counting the TSWE words in

relation to the total inventory of lexical items contained in the ESL textbooks. Table 4 summarizes the findings.

Summarizing the results of an examination of the degree to which the ESL textbook series contained in the study can be expected to prepare the student for high school and college proficiency/ placement tests, we cannot easily ignore the apparent significance of the percentages of words on these highly important tests that are not taught in any of the books in the series examined at any level: TOEFL, 46.3%; Michigan test vocabulary sections, 39%; and the TSWE, 43%.

Yet another concern that is beyond the scope of this study, but which touches upon a relevant point well made by Elliot Judd (1978), is that the teaching of vocabulary is too often secondary to the teaching of grammar. Judd points out this weakness and then offers a logical solution:

> By devoting time to the lexicon, the students will acquire . . . needed vocabulary items in a logical manner, and the chances of randomized appearance of vocabulary . . . will be avoided. The direct teaching approach . . . can help ensure that our students will receive those words and phrases which they need to know when they leave ESL programs. (73)

What is relevant here, of course, is that unless the thousands of students studying English worldwide are learning a high percentage of the same words, this "randomized appearance" will continue to be a problem.

In addition to the lack of uniformity among the lexicons in ESL textbooks, I have a further concern regarding the relative value of some of the words that are included in the word lists. For example,

such words as finger-clip, flotsam, daguerreotype, and ear-flap are included in one or more books. While it may be nice to know these words, I believe there are dozens of words that a foreign student would need to know earlier and use more frequently than these.

In closing, I would like to come full circle and return momentarily to my opening comment about "unity amid diversity" and to suggest a way out of the problem that this over-diversification causes. As we all know, Japan, for example, enjoys a literacy rate of over 95%; some even say 99.5%, certainly an attainment worth looking at. What we find there is a national educational system in which, on any given day, and almost at any given hour, students in classrooms from the northern island of Hokkaido to the southernmost tip of Kyushu are receiving instruction from identical lesson materials, so that by the time a student graduates from high shcool, the Ministry of Education knows exactly what each child has been exposed to, and if a student moves from one area to another, he does not lose or gain a single day of work; he comes in right where he feft off. Furthermore, an official syllabary of some 1850 characters has been established out of several thousand Chinese characters with which to form words to be learned by the Japanese. This inventory of characters was not compiled just for the schools; the newspapers must restrict their writing to the use of these chosen characters as well. Thus, by being taught these core characters systematically and uniformly throughout the country and at prescribed grade levels, students, teachers, parents, and the officials at the Ministry of Education know precisely at what grade level and at what time during the school year a particular word is presented.

Now, being Americans with something akin to obsession with the idea of individualism, I would anticipate that some would argue that

using this system would not allow enough creativity and competition, and I suspect that a good deal of the protest would come from publishers who depend on differences to boost sales of a given text. I must counter, however, by saying that I believe Americans are also marked by having a high degree of ingenuity and innovative spirit, and that there is a middle road. I believe that we can, and should, devise a plan that retains the best of both worlds; we don't have to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. Again, we have a golden opportunity to demonstrate that Americans are equally as skillful as are our Japanese friends at adapting--at finding a way to come upwith an all-American curriculum that fits our needs fully as well as the Japanese system has served their needs for a long time.

Basically I am suggesting that if we, as ESL teachers, administrators, and researchers, would establish a core vocabulary list which uniformly and sytematically introduces given words at specified proficiency levels in all the texts, we would then be free to expand and to supplement with additional words ad infinitum. In textbooks, the challenge to publishers working with writers to find interesting and varied contexts in which to introduce a basic fixed syllabary could be a stimulating one, and I believe, a very worthwhile one.

I truly believe that, until we find some way to assure each student who invests both time and money in preparing to study in the United States receives an equal chance to acquire English proficiency adequate for study in its schools and colleges, we will continue to turn out students ill-prepared for the challenge and the demands that higher education makes. In the "land of opportunity," this should not happen, and I do not believe that it has to happen.

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